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NEXT
ISSUE
ON SALE
OCT. 18

NOVELETTE

PAINT THE TOWN GREEN *by Robert Colby* 108

SHORT STORIES

I'LL KILL YOU IN THE MORNING *by J. F. Burke* 5

DEATH SONG *by Stephen Wasylyk* 14

THE KEENER EYE *by Bruce M. Fisher* 29

LIFE SENTENCE *by Kathryn Gottlieb* 44

EXPLOSIVE CARGO *by John Lutz* 53

BOX IN A BOX *by Jack Ritchie* 60

THE GARAGE SALE HABIT *by Tonita S. Gardner* 71

RETRIBUTION LIMITED *by Anthony Bloomfield* 79

THE PIONEER STRAIN *by Loren D. Estleman* 90

A SHROUD FOR THE RAILROAD MAN *by Alvin S. Fick* 99

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Henry naturally wondered why the case reminded Ralph of Poe . . .

BOX IN A BOX

by JACK RITCHIE



When Ralph and I reached the scene, the large bedroom was noisy with uniformed policemen, technicians, medics, and photographers fussing around the perimeter of the body.

Ralph put two fingers into his mouth and whistled.

Damn, I thought, I've never been able to do that.

A silence of sorts ensued and then a short round man in his early fifties spoke up. "I'm innocent. I've been framed."

I regarded him sternly. "You will have your opportunity to speak later."

"What's wrong with right now?"

I conceded the point. "Very well, who are you?"

"The murderer." He quickly amended that. "I mean everybody *thinks* that I murdered my wife Hermione but I didn't. My name is Eustis Crawford."

Ralph and I took Eustis Crawford into an adjoining room where we found a tall thin man wearing a hearing aid and a dark-haired woman in her thirties waiting.

The tall thin man made the introductions. "I am Oglethorpe Wesson. And this is my sister Genevieve." He regarded Eustis Crawford coldly. "Eustis murdered his wife, who is, or rather was, our aunt. He and Hermione were the only people in their bedroom when she died. The windows and the doors were bolted from the inside. When Genevieve and I finally succeeded in entering, we found Hermione dead on the floor and Eustis unconscious on the floor beside her with a revolver in his hand. Obviously he had fainted after he shot her."

"I did not faint," Eustis Crawford said stiffly. "I definitely did not faint."

Oglethorpe snorted. "You're always fainting, Eustis. Last week you passed out in the garden when you thought you'd been stung by a bee. And yesterday, when you tweaked your finger in the liquor-cabinet door. You faint whenever you are under any kind of stress and I submit that murder is a shock to the nervous system, even that of the murderer's."

Eustis's eyes were reflective. "The last thing I remember is sitting up in bed reading and listening to my tape recorder. And then for some reason I found myself on the floor beside Hermione with Oglethorpe shaking me awake." He stifled a yawn. "Very possibly I simply dozed off and fell out of bed."

"Nonsense," Oglethorpe said. "If you had fallen out of bed, surely your thud on the floor would have wakened you. And furthermore, you were at least twelve feet from the bed when I found you. Face it, Eustis, you shot Hermione and then fainted."

I turned to Genevieve. "You heard the shot?"

She nodded. "We were just outside their bedroom door. Oglethorpe and I had finished listening to the ten o'clock TV news and we were in

the hallway going to our respective rooms when we heard the shot. We knocked at the door and asked if there was anything wrong, but we received no answer. We tried the doorknob, but the door was bolted."

"How did you get in?"

Oglethorpe touched his hearing aid for a moment. "We went through my bedroom out onto the balcony till we got to the French doors, but they were bolted from the inside."

Genevieve corroborated that. "Oglethorpe finally had to take one of the balcony chairs and break a glass pane in one of the doors. He reached inside and unbolted it."

"Are you positive that *all* of the French doors were bolted from the inside?"

"Positive," Genevieve said. "And the bedroom door to the hallway was bolted from the inside too."

I nodded thoughtfully. "You and your brother spent the evening watching television?"

"No," Oglethorpe said. "Frankly, I don't care for television except for the news programs. I was downstairs in my workshop turning table legs most of the evening."

I turned to Eustis. "Did you have a quarrel with your wife?"

He put his right hand over his heart. "We were happily married for nearly eight months. We never exchanged so much as a harsh word."

Genevieve reluctantly agreed. "Come to think of it, Eustis never *did* quarrel with Hermione. I think that's a little unnatural."

"If we should rule out murder as the result of a quarrel," I said, "would there be any other reason Mr. Crawford would want to murder his wife?"

Oglethorpe adjusted something on his hearing aid. "For her money, of course. Hermione was rather wealthy, in a lower-upper-class sort of way, and she kept Eustis on a strict allowance."

I drew Ralph to one side, "Well, Ralph, we've finally got one."

"Got one what?"

"A closed-room murder mystery."

"There's no mystery about it. Eustis shot his wife. He's the only one who could have done it. The room was locked from the inside."

"Exactly," I said. "But, Ralph, if Eustis was going to murder his wife—especially for money—would he have arranged to lock himself in the same room with her body?"

"All right, maybe it wasn't for money. They just had their first spat, he lost his temper, and shot her. Then he fainted."

"Ralph," I said. "This is a rather large house and it has many rooms. Doesn't it strike you as rather a coincidence that Oglethorpe and Genevieve should just *happen* to have been outside the door at the exact moment the shot was fired?"

We drew Genevieve Wesson to a private corner of the room. "You say your Aunt Hermione had quite a bit of money?" I asked.

"Quite a bit."

"And Eustis?"

"Nothing, really. Eustis was the chief accountant at the Performing Arts Center. Hermione was on the Board of Sponsors and she met Eustis when she came to him to discuss the financial arrangements for an appearance of the Bulgarian National Ballet Company. One thing led to another and they were married."

"Ah," I said. "And after she married Eustis, did she not change her will so that he would get the major portion of her estate in the event of her death?"

"Hermione never made out a will in her life. She was one of those people who believe they will die immediately if they do."

"If Hermione had died of natural causes, her husband would have gotten her estate?"

"I suppose that's what would have happened."

"However, your aunt did not die of natural causes, did she? And so if Eustis is convicted of her murder he cannot inherit any part of her estate, since a murderer may not profit from his crime."

Genevieve smiled. "I'm counting on that."

I returned to Eustis who had yawned again and now appeared to be looking for a place to sit down. "Could you give me your version of this unfortunate incident?"

He sighed. "Well, there really isn't much to tell. Hermione and I went upstairs at about ten. We usually read in bed for a while before turning out the light. The last thing I remember is reading Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* and listening to the *Pavan for a Dead Princess* on my tape recorder." He frowned in thought. "Or did I play *The Pines of Rome*? For some reason I keep confusing the two compositions."

"Mr. Crawford," I said, "do you take pills—I mean sleeping pills?"

"Goodness no. I have no trouble at all getting to sleep once I close my eyes."

"Before you and your wife went up to your bedroom, did you have anything to eat or drink?"

"I had a brandy and soda downstairs. I usually do before I go to sleep. It helps me to relax."

"Who made the drink for you?"

"I made it myself."

"Who owns the revolver used to kill your wife?"

"I really don't know. I never saw it before in my life."

Ralph and I took Eustis back to the bedroom where the murder had been committed. I spoke to Dr. Tanner, the chief medic. "I'd like you to take a sample of this man's blood."

Tanner nodded. "Am I supposed to look for anything in particular?"

"Barbiturates," I said. "Or anything in the sleep-inducing category."

I left Eustis with Tanner and took Ralph to one side. "We've got to examine this room thoroughly, Ralph. I want to be absolutely certain that this was indeed a locked chamber at the time of the murder. Search for any openings, no matter how small. Hot-air registers, bell ropes."

"Bell ropes?"

"Those things used for summoning servants. Snakes have been known to crawl up and down bell ropes and fatally bite people."

Ralph looked at the ceiling. "Well, now, Henry, snakes and bell ropes are tricky things. Personally, I think that if a snake started down from the top of a bell rope, he'd just lose his grip and flop down and maybe fracture a vertebra. And if he tried to get back up, I don't think he could make it either. Bell ropes are just too vertical, Henry. Now if you could find one that's off-center about forty-five degrees, maybe, just maybe—"

"Ralph," I said patiently, "why must you rattle on about the prehensility and gripping strength of vipers? Hermione Crawford was shot. Not bitten by a snake." I rubbed my hands. "Now let us examine the room for any apertures."

After fifteen minutes, we rejoined each other.

"Not one damn aperture, Henry. No bell ropes or hot-air registers. The room is heated by radiant baseboard. As far as I can see, this place was airtight when Hermione Crawford was shot and Eustis was alone

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with her when it happened."

"Ralph," I said, "look at this tape recorder on the nightstand."

He looked. "So?"

"It doesn't have any tape in it," I said.

"It's right next to the recorder, Henry."

"I know. But it shouldn't be." I inserted the tape, turned on the recorder, and listened. Was it *The Pines of Rome* or the *Pavan for a Dead Princess*? I shrugged and turned it off.

I went back to Eustis Crawford, who was now having his hands tested for the presence of gunpowder grains. "Mr. Crawford, you say that the last thing you remember is being in bed with your wife and reading while listening to your tape recorder?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear out the tape to the end and then remove it from the tape recorder?"

"No. I fell asleep while it was playing."

I left Eustis yawning and took Ralph to the French doors. "Look at this, Ralph. Each of these panes of glass is held into place by four small slats of wood." I pointed to the frame which had been broken to gain access to the room. "You will notice that there are some light scratches here, as though perhaps a screwdriver had been used to remove the slats at one time."

Ralph peered closer and said, "Hm."

I nodded. "I must speculate to some degree, but I believe I have the answer to this entire riddle. We will start from the beginning. This evening someone in this household slipped barbiturates into Eustis Crawford's bottle of brandy. Unless the bottle has been destroyed or hidden, I think that we'll find it in the liquor cabinet downstairs. And after consuming his drink, Eustis went upstairs with his wife."

Ralph rubbed his jaw. "And once they got inside, they bolted the bedroom door and also the French doors?"

"Not necessarily, Ralph, though it's possible. But they did get into bed and Eustis picked up a book and turned on his tape recorder. Meanwhile, the murderer waited somewhere out in the darkness of the balcony until he saw Eustis lapse into his drugged sleep."

"Murderer?"

"Or murderess. I will use the word murderer merely for convenience at the moment. And once Eustis was asleep, the murderer en-

tered the room via the French doors. Or, if they were bolted, all he had to do was tap on the glass to gain Hermione's attention, smile sweetly, and ask to be let in because he wanted to talk with her for a moment. And since the person she saw was either her nephew or her niece, she had no reason to suspect foul play. But when Hermione let him in, he produced the revolver and shot her.

"He then dragged the unconscious Eustis out of his bed and placed him beside his dead wife. He replaced the cartridge he had fired with another one and then formed Eustis's hand around the revolver. He fired the gun again, this time through the open French door and into the night. He did that so that we would be certain of finding gunpowder grains on Eustis's hand."

"How come nobody heard the shots, Henry?"

"Because the murderer used a silencer."

Ralph thought about it. "In that case, though, shouldn't the murderer have powder grains on his hand too?"

"I doubt it. If he knew enough about powder grains to put them on Eustis's hand, then surely he must have been intelligent enough to take pains that none of them appeared on his own person. Very likely he wore gloves and some other protective device to prevent the powder grains from getting on his hands or clothing."

I noticed that Eustis had fallen asleep in his chair. "And then the murderer removed the *Pavan for a Dead Princess*—or whatever—from Eustis's tape recorder and substituted a tape of his own. This tape was entirely blank, except for the sound of one pistol shot."

Ralph raised an interested eyebrow.

I nodded. "Timing was incredibly important here, of course. He knew the precise moment the tape would reach the point of the shot, which would be within a minute or two of ten-forty. He turned on the recorder, with the volume undoubtedly high, and then bolted the bedroom door from the inside—if it was not bolted already. And then, probably with a screwdriver, he removed one of the panes from a French door—the one which we now see broken.

"He stepped out onto the balcony, closed the door after him, reached back inside, and ran the bolt home. Then he replaced the windowpane and the slats, went down to the drawing room, and remained there listening to the ten o'clock news. At ten-thirty, as usual Oglethorpe and Genevieve went upstairs, putting them in the

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vicinity of Hermione's bedroom door at the moment the tape reached the sound of the shot. When the murderer gained access to the room from the balcony later, it was a simple matter to slip the tape back into his pocket—he has probably managed to dispose of it by now."

Ralph scratched his neck speculatively. "Who's your candidate for the murder? Oglethorpe or Genevieve?"

"Oglethorpe."

"Why Oglethorpe?"

"Because of the hearing aid."

"What does the hearing aid have to do with it?"

"I haven't quite pinpointed that yet, but it's probably the key to this entire case. Every time I've looked at Oglethorpe, he's been fiddling with that hearing aid. That's got to be significant somehow."

"Why?"

"Ralph," I said, "do you remember the Gillingham murder case? One of our prime suspects, Elmer Bjornson, appeared to be confined to a wheelchair, but we discovered that he could really walk. That taught me to always be suspicious of murder suspects in wheelchairs and by extension I think I can safely apply that to people who wear hearing aids."

"Henry," Ralph said, "it's true that Bjornson could walk, but that didn't have anything to do with the murder of Gillingham. We just stumbled across that before we arrested the real murderer."

I rubbed my jaw. "You mean that Oglethorpe's hearing aid has *nothing* to do with this murder?"

"I'm afraid not, Henry."

I pulled myself together. "Ah well, nailing the true murderer in this case is just a matter of perseverance. We will come up with the culprit or culpritness soon. But at least, for the time being, we have succeeded in preventing an innocent man from being sent to prison." I smiled modestly. "Actually, I suppose almost any reasonably competent detective would eventually have come up with all the glaring inconsistencies in this case."

Ralph nodded. "That's right, Henry."

There was a rather long silence and I began to feel uneasy. "What is it, Ralph?"

He sighed. "This case reminds me of the purloined letter."

"How does it remind you of the purloined letter?"

"Henry, the best place to hide a murder is inside a murder. Suppose you want to kill your wife for her money. No matter how cleverly you plan the thing, you know that you will still be the most logical suspect. The police would dig and dig and the chances are good that they would come up with something that would trip you up. So you decide to take the bull by the horns. Since you are going to be suspected anyway, why not go all out? Make it seem at first glance that only you could possibly have killed her."

I closed my eyes.

Ralph continued. "When you go upstairs with your wife, you shoot her, using a silencer on the gun. Then you leave the room and get rid of the silencer and the spent cartridge and replace it with a fresh one. You return to the room and wait until you hear Oglethorpe and Genevieve coming up the stairs. You let them get just outside the door and then you fire the pistol out of the open French door into the night air.

"And while Oglethorpe and Genevieve are knocking at the bedroom door, you simply close and bolt the French doors—one of whose window frames you have previously tampered with. Then you swallow a few barbiturates and lie down beside your dead wife. You pretend that you are unconscious when Genevieve and Oglethorpe break into the room and that is that."

Ralph sighed again. "You then sit back and let the police do their work. They will realize that the situation is just *too* pat, *too* overwhelming. Point by point, they will unravel the frame-up and feel noble while they are doing it. Even if, by some remote chance, you are actually brought to trial, any good lawyer could point out the holes in the case and get you an acquittal."

I stared at Eustis, asleep in his chair with a smile on his face.

Damn, I thought, Ralph's right. And he's going to get away with it.

We carried Eustis to headquarters, but without any great optimism.

Then Ralph and I dropped in at the nearest tavern.

The bartender recognized me. "What'll it be, sergeant? Tomato juice or sherry?"

"Sherry."

"Oh?" he said. "That bad a day?"

I nodded glumly. "That bad a day."

He filled my glass to the brim and gave me water for a chaser.

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